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SUBJECT: Gaza's Aftermath: A Civil Society Activist's View

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a January 26 meeting with PD Offs, a leading Palestinian civil society activist, Hania Al-Bitar, expressed concern that the war in Gaza has radicalized Palestinian youth, causing them to turn away from peaceful activism in favor of violent opposition. She said Hamas has "won" because young Palestinians saw Hamas fighters standing up to Israel. Angry and frustrated over the situation in Gaza, Al-Bitar said she and other civil society leaders are setting aside previous judgments of the USG's commitment to helping the Palestinian people for now and putting faith in the Obama administration. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In a meeting with PD Offs on January 26, Hania Al-Bitar, Director of the Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), shared the hopes and concerns of Palestinian civil society leaders in the wake of the Gaza crisis. Expressing sadness and anger at events in Gaza and a perception that the USG did not do enough to prevent the "catastrophe" there, Al-Bitar noted talk among civil society groups of a political and social "boycott" of the United States. However, she said, most civil society leaders want to give the Obama administration a chance and so will wait and see what new initiatives the President will bring to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Al-Bitar said she and others are pleased with the appointment of Senator Mitchell as a Special Envoy.

¶3. (SBU) Al-Bitar cautioned that the war in Gaza has changed Palestinians, particularly youth. "While people [in the West Bank] do not favor Hamas, and while they did not like all of the scenes of violence they saw in Gaza, they also saw Hamas fighters continuing to fight and felt a sense of dignity that Hamas was able to fight the Israeli military," Al-Bitar said. She is concerned that, as a result, the Palestinian public is losing faith in the effectiveness of negotiations.

¶4. (SBU) Since the war in Gaza, Al-Bitar has found that Palestinian youth, in particular, see violent opposition as the only option. She fears years of work to convince youth there are alternatives to violence are collapsing. She said, "Hamas has won." Hamas and its violent values are emerging victorious in the war of ideas, Al-Bitar said. Hamas is regarded by many, especially youth, as national heroes, and many young people aspire to fight like them. She and other civic leaders fear young people will reject programs and campaigns built around nonviolence. "These days we have to be careful about the terminology we use to describe a program," Al-Bitar lamented. "We cannot say an event is about 'nonviolent' activism."

¶5. (SBU) Al-Bitar said civil society leaders feel it is now critical that they find ways to communicate directly with the new administration and with Special Envoy Mitchell, and not rely on Palestinian political leaders to do so for them.

¶6. (SBU) NOTE: This was the first face-to-face meeting with a close civil society contact in the West Bank since the conflict in Gaza began. Al-Bitar had declined requests to meet over the past ten days. At the start of the January 26 meeting, Al-Bitar admitted she was reluctant to meet given her feelings about Gaza, but said she

would continue her partnership with the USG. End Note.
WALLES